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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001928

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR
ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MICHEL SLEIMAN ANNOYED AT AOUN

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a one-on-one meeting with the Ambassador on 12/6, LAF Commander Michel Sleiman expressed considerable annoyance with MP Michel Aoun, seeing Aoun as the primary obstacle preventing his election as Lebanon's next president. In a "who-does-he-think-he-is" sense of exasperation, Sleiman rejected Aoun's demands that he step down 18 months into his presidential tenure and that he abdicate presidential powers in advance to secure Aoun's blessing. Sleiman also vowed not to accept the presidency through non-constitutional means of election proposed by Parliament Speaker Berri to avoid the requisite cabinet approval (by a cabinet Berri deems illegitimate) for a constitutional amendment. Sleiman denied the press reports that he met with Nasrallah this week. He claimed that, if elected, he wanted to forge a new partnership between Lebanon's presidency and the United States, to try to reverse damage done during Emile Lahoud's presidential term. He cautioned that he would be a "president for Lebanon, not a president for Syria or a president for the United States," while hoping to build close relations with both. End summary.

AOUN SETS, AND SLEIMAN REJECTS,
CONDITIONS FOR SLEIMAN PRESIDENCY

¶2. (C) The Ambassador met with LAF Commander Michel Sleiman on 12/6, in Sleiman's Ministry of Defense office. The Ambassador joked that Sleiman had refrained from packing his personal effects for the short drive from the Ministry to the Baabda Presidential Palace. Sleiman responded that Michel Aoun, "always hoping," reserved the Baabda-bound moving vans several years ago and hasn't released them yet. Turning serious, Sleiman said that his private meeting with Aoun a few days earlier was "terrible." Aoun told him he would support him for the presidency on several conditions. First, he would resign after 18 months into the six-year term, paving the way for an Aoun presidency after legislative elections. Second, he would prohibit any cabinet from being formed with Saad Hariri or Fouad Siniora as prime minister.

¶3. (C) Sleiman said that he categorically rejected both

conditions. An 18-month presidency, determined in advance (as opposed to a shortened term because of death, say), weakens the office. And Lebanon's post-Taif constitution requires the president to ask whomever the majority of MPs pick to be the PM-designate, tasked with trying to form a cabinet. Sleiman said that he would not agree to a constitutional violation of the presidential powers (i.e., a veto on the choice of PM) as the cost for becoming president.

"If I violate the constitution as president, who will respect it? Who will respect me?" Moreover, he noted, PM Siniora and Saad Hariri were the ones who support his presidential bid. "How can I say no" to either of them as prime minister?

AOUN CLAIMS TO WANT TO STRENGTH PRESIDENCY,
BUT SLEIMAN BELIEVES REAL GOAL IS TO WEAKEN HIM

14. (C) The Ambassador asked Sleiman about Aoun's other public pronouncements and demands, such as the proportional split of the cabinet according to parliamentary bloc representation. "That man needs to see a doctor!" Sleiman said, wiggling his forefinger to the side of his head as if indicating mental illness). Aoun claims to want to strengthen the president. But, instead, Aoun wants to deny Sleiman one of the few absolute powers accruing to the president -- the ability to co-sign with the PM the cabinet formation decree, naming ministers and portfolios. Sleiman indicated that he would use that signatory authority in order to place some of his own people on the cabinet. He said that, in his view, his ministers should, by swinging between March 14 and March 8 blocs within the cabinet, be able to provide the decisive cabinet votes.

15. (C) In Sleiman's view, Aoun is trying to undercut Sleiman's potential presidential powers now, because he knows that Sleiman's share of the cabinet will come at the expense

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of Aoun's potential representation. Aoun pretends to want a strong presidency, but he knows that a strong president who is not Aoun is actually his biggest threat. Aoun is also worried about the 2009 parliamentary elections, Sleiman mused, knowing that a powerful president will take Christian MPs away from Aoun. Aoun is always talking about trying to change Taif. But "instead of trying to change Taif," Sleiman said, "maybe we should try to implement it first." He vowed to refuse any extra-constitutional or non-constitutional demands on presidential prerogatives. The Ambassador noted that the United States was making no such demand.

REFUSING TO BE ELECTED NON-CONSTITUTIONALLY

16. (C) The Ambassador asked Sleiman about the process by which he expects his election, now generally accepted as inevitable, to take place. Sleiman cautioned that he was not taking his election for granted. While he thought that Berri and Hizballah were trying to distance themselves from Aoun's "package deal" approach in order to elect him, Sleiman did not know how Berri would resolve the issue of the constitutional amendment, since Berri refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the cabinet (that, like the parliament, must approve the amendment). He said that he absolutely refused Berri's idea of having the parliament elect Sleiman while ignoring the requisite constitutional cooling-off period. He said that he does not want to start his presidency with a constitutional cloud over his head. He believes that he "definitely" needs a constitutional amendment to become president, and the constitutional amendment "definitely" needs the approval of the cabinet. Perhaps, he said, Berri was "just playing games" and would eventually send at least one Shia minister back to the cabinet (to make it legitimate in March 8 views). But he wasn't sure.

DENYING RECENT MEETING WITH NASRALLAH

¶7. (C) The Ambassador asked about press reports that Sleiman had met with Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah recently. Bristling for the first time in the meeting, Sleiman denied such a meeting, and noted that al-Manar, too, had just that morning denied that such a meeting took place. "But that doesn't mean I don't have the right to see Nasrallah," he said, noting that he had met with a wide variety of political figures recently and Nasrallah many times in the past. The Ambassador said that his question stemmed not from criticism but from the desire to have some idea of Hizballah's expectations for a Sleiman presidency. "They know what to expect," Sleiman said. "They know that I am a Lebanese, not an Iranian." He repeated his line that he wants the army to have the monopoly of military force in Lebanon, but that the United States "can't expect me to disarm Hizballah from one day to the next."

HOPING TO REPAIR DAMAGE FROM LAHOUD PRESIDENCY

¶8. (C) The Ambassador noted that the United States looked forward to working with a Lebanese president committed to Lebanon's sovereignty and independence. We had many difficult issues to face together, including Hizballah's arms. Sleiman vowed that he wanted a strong partnership with the United States, "like we have with our armies," and he promised (again borrowing a line he used in an earlier meeting) "new behavior and new language" from the presidency.

Emile Lahoud's tenure was very bad for the presidency, especially because of the severing of relations between the president and the United States. "I want to rebuild trust," Sleiman said. At the same time, he cautioned that, "if elected, I will be a president for Lebanon, not a president for Syria or for the United States." He hoped to have good relations with both, based on mutual respect.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Given that all the focus this week is on the process of electing Sleiman as president, this meeting, too, concentrated on Sleiman's reactions to the various ideas in play. We did not have the time to probe him again regarding

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his thinking about substantive issues such as Hizballah's arms and relations with Syria (although he knows very well our views and would probably give us predictable answers he knows we'd want to hear). However, we liked very much what we heard regarding his impressions of Michel Aoun's and Nabih Berri's procedural games. He seemed particularly annoyed at Aoun, and we believe that his analysis of Aoun's motivations -- to weaken Sleiman as president in order to preserve Aoun's role as the pre-eminent Christian political leader -- is spot-on. (One of the only unmitigated pleasures we anticipate of a Sleiman presidency, which will probably be a mixed bag of good and bad, is watching Aoun's popular support wither.)

¶10. (C) We're less certain how deep is his conviction to oppose Nabih Berri's anti-constitutional attempts to elect him. If Berri refuses to permit a constitutional amendment to pass through the cabinet (as required by the constitution), and March 14 refuses to elect Sleiman without a legal constitutional amendment, whom will Sleiman blame for the impasse? His views will be important, and he may not be able to remain carefully on the sidelines. PM Siniora, for one, is trying hard to court Sleiman (after years of mutual antipathy), so that Sleiman starts playing a more forceful role as president-elect now. The Ambassador was with Siniora early on 12/7 and eavesdropped in a conversation Siniora had with the Commander, in which the PM, pacing his office and waving his arms, tried viacell phone to motivate and script

Sleiman for an intervention with Berri on behalf of
legitimate elections via a constitutional amendment.
FELTMAN